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Couperus, Stefan; Kaal, Harm; Randeraad, Nico; van Trigt, Paul

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Provincializing the Dutch State: South Holland in the 19th Century

STEFAN COUPERUS, HARM KAAL, NICO
RANDERAAD, PAUL VAN TRIGT

Introduction

For the sake of convenience, the arrival of the prince of Orange at Scheveningen beach on 30 November 1813 is generally accepted as marking the birth of the Dutch nation-state.¹ The Napoleonic troops had left the country in a hurry, which had paved the way for the return of the Orange dynasty. The prince soon ›accepted‹ the request to become the sovereign of the Netherlands. Within a few months a new constitution was drawn up, and on 30 March 1814 Prince William Frederick was inaugurated as King William I of the Netherlands. Constitutionally, the new Dutch state was born. In almost every other sense, however, unification and integration had only entered their formative stages.²

This article argues that Dutch statehood was the product of a hard-won process that required a good

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SCHLAGWORTE

Administration Etat
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Geschichte

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Netherlands Ortsbereisungen

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Verwaltungsgeschichte

Verwaltungspraxis Verwaltungsraum

administration spatial turn

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part of the 19th century to reach some sort of administrative consolidation. We look at state building from a decentered perspective, not so much from above or below, but rather *from the middle*, concentrating on the province of South Holland, and *from within*, foregrounding the piecemeal fine-tuning of the administrative system at the provincial level. This amounts to a re-reading of the emergence of ›provincial statehood‹, the gradual confirmation of the province as a sub-national politico-administrative entity that generated a distinct sense of statehood among administrators and citizens. Provincial statehood does not equate with the way in which national statehood resonated provincially, but refers to the articulation of the policies, practices and routines that ultimately constituted the province as a distinct part of the Dutch polity — beyond the strict constitutional sense.

Whereas our title draws its inspiration from Dipesh Chakrabarty's famous study on European thought in a postcolonial world, our setting is obviously far removed from his global outlook.³ We are, however, taking his notion of provincializing (or decentering) very literally by zooming in on one of the (then) eleven provinces of the Netherlands. Moreover, we aim at showing that every administrative intervention had a spatial element or — to put it differently — created its own spatiality. The province, in that sense, was not a fixed territorial entity, but an amalgamation of spatial properties, depending on the administrative issue at stake.⁴

For the political and administrative elites that came into power in 1814, it was not at all clear how to construe their endeavor. On the one hand, the new unitary state — between 1815 and 1830 including Belgium — continued the hierarchically ordered division, introduced by the French regime, into

central state, provincial government and local authorities: a convenient but contested choice. This arrangement put a definitive end to the loose, confederal structure of the pre-revolutionary Republic. On the other hand, important institutions and bodies of the polymorphous Old Regime were maintained. The district water boards (›waterschappen‹), dating from the Middle Ages, were left intact as separate administrative units under the dual — and hence sometimes conflicting — supervision of the central state and the provinces. Local government institutions lost the uniformity of the Napoleonic system and were divided into two types, cities and rural villages, while the latter could include anything between small towns, shires, manors, and even hamlets without inhabitants. The Republican provinces were restored, as were the Provincial States, with the electoral recruitment of their members remaining largely in line with procedures of the recent past.

The search for an effective balance between the old and the new continued to pervade the interior administration of the new state. It seems that the restoration of the old provinces and the electoral system based on estates was mainly done to placate the old local elites, and thereby facilitate peace and reconciliation after the tumultuous Batavian-French period. As Van Hogendorp, one of the authors of the new Constitution, noted, »the preservation of ›the provincial‹ is useful, and shall be highly congenial to the entire nation«.⁵ The old elites were paying a price, though. The provincial council no longer had a direct say in national government (as the Provincial States had enjoyed during the Republic), only met once a year for a few days, and had little financial scope. The provincial executive, by contrast, was given a more prominent role, in particular with

regard to local government. The emphasis on the executive power, no longer acting in an arbitrary manner as it was said to have done under the Old Regime, but in accordance with the law as expression of the will of the people, reflected the idea of ›good government‹ — efficient organization and effective control aimed at harmonizing general and local interests — that the theorists of the Napoleonic regime had developed.⁶

The primacy of executive power manifested itself also in the administrative division of the province of Holland into two parts, North and South. Whereas the province had one representative assembly, it had two governors, two executive councils, and two seats for the administration of the northern and southern part, Haarlem and The Hague. In other words, the legislative and executive powers of the province of Holland literally acted in two different spaces. It took until 1840 before this rather awkward territorial ambiguity came to an end, and two fully-fledged provinces were created. The map of South Holland, however, was not fixed then, and has been redrawn ever since. On the one hand, at various occasions small border corrections have reshaped the outer borders of the province, and internally the municipal borders have continued to change until the present day. On the other hand, through massive land reclamation, the amount of arable and habitable land has significantly increased (fig. 1).

Our article focuses on typical competences of the provincial administration, such as oversight of municipalities, water management, supervision of infrastructural work, involvement in welfare and health arrangements, and the monitoring of economic developments. We foreground the ›little tools of knowledge‹, such as periodical reports, circulars, statistical investigations, handbooks, and

the like, to capture the administrative mentality of the officials in action.⁷ It is the thick description and contextualization of administrative practice by historical actors that will allow for an understanding of how public administration at the provincial level actually worked and changed — not based on how promoters of specific legal, administrative and political agendas have epitomized its competences and power.

Tradition and reform, intervention and interaction — a made-to-measure literature review

The liberal opposition that gradually gained clout in the second quarter of the 19th century was particularly depreciative of the two-faced system of the Restoration. With increasing commitment and quite successfully, it campaigned for constitutional reform. The Netherlands were one of the few countries in Europe where ›1848‹ led to a rapid liberal victory. The commission presenting the revised Constitution of 1848 called the existing system of local and provincial government »a mixture of outdated Dutch and Napoleonic-French elements«, which had not generated a truly public spirit.⁸ This clearly reflected the opinion of Johan Rudolph Thorbecke, the author of this Constitution, who had often criticized the lack of autonomy of municipal and provincial government under king William I, in particular as this had emerged from the »unsystematic« regulations for urban and countryside municipalities. Evidently, in the view of Thorbecke ›cum suis‹, the revised Constitution would repair all that.



Fig. 1. The map shows the southern part of Holland in 1824, when the province was still one. South Holland, nevertheless, is depicted as a separate entity, subdivided into smaller administrative and territorial units. (Source: Nationaal Archief, The Hague, NL-HaNA 4.ZHPB4, inv.nr. 11.)

This ›success‹ of 1848, however, has to some extent obscured the long-drawn-out process of state building, constitutional reform and democratization that had already set in with the ›Staatsregeling‹ of 1798, establishing the unitary state, and continued until the Constitution of 1917 introduced universal suffrage for men and paved the way for female suffrage, which became effective in 1922.⁹ In this perspective the revised constitution of 1848 and the ›organic‹ laws ensuing from it (in particular the Provincial Law of 1850 and the Communal Law of 1851) were important but not decisive moments. The reform discourse, however, also affected the ways in which legal and historical scholarship came to describe the workings of local and provincial government: before 1848 the power of tradition passed down from the Old Regime was said to prevail, whereas afterwards the generally accepted narrative became that the path to modernity had definitively set in.¹⁰ We argue that the traditionalist

and the reformist interpretation are both misleading,

 since they are driven by a degree of teleology
 inspired by the craving for reform.

To be sure, we do not deny that both tradition and reform impacted on the practice of public administration. Their influence, however, was not merely ›contextual‹, beyond the reach of individual actors, but immediate, as part of the professional mindset of administrative elites and rank-and-file bureaucrats when doing their job. Tradition, in this sense, does not have to be just an impersonal notion explaining (in hindsight) the attitudes of the civil service as a whole, but can play a more direct role in day-to-day administrative practice, for example by guiding public officials when negotiating the ›old‹ and the ›new‹ and accommodating conflicting interests. Reform is, in the same breath, not so much about embracing a future not yet known, but a concrete desire to realize particular political and administrative aims. With this approach, we try to project backwards what political scientists Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes have proposed for the study of present-day public elites, that is »to provide accounts of stability and change rooted in the beliefs and practices of individual actors as they struggle to negotiate policies and practices in the face of changing circumstances«.¹¹

For historians this approach is perhaps less challenging and more common practice than for political scientists, who often find it difficult to extricate themselves from positivist theories of the state. In many ways Patrick Joyce's social history of the British state fulfills the research agenda of Bevir and Rhodes for the 19th century.¹² The beliefs and practices that Bevir and Rhodes wish to seek out can be informed by a multitude of factors, which in this article we cannot all hope to operationalize. One

element, however, is particularly precious for our analysis. Bevir and Rhodes are struck by the ordinariness of administrative life, and foreground office routines, everyday performances, and the mundane nature of many decisions. Insofar as our sources allow, we pay special attention to routine, which we view not so much as a form of administrative behavior characterized by standardized, unremarkable actions, but rather as a way of getting to grips with and managing a complex reality. In short, routine entails rules and red tape, but often with a purpose or an outcome beyond mere repetition.¹³

We should like to disentangle the rise of the state in the 19th century from the reform discourse which has increasingly dominated the general understanding of Dutch administrative history, in particular with regard to the state's performance in the ›periphery‹ — that is, outside the central level. By decentering and ›provincializing‹ the nation-state, we intend to contribute to a better understanding of the particularities of Dutch administrative history. More concretely, our contribution aims at reassessing ›in its own right‹ the role of the provincial government of South Holland from 1814 onwards.¹⁴ Provincial government consisted of the elected provincial council (also known as ›Provinciale Staten‹, or Provincial States), the provincial executive (›Gedeputeerde Staten‹), since 1825 consisting of seven members, the state-appointed governor or, since 1848, king's commissioner, and the provincial civil service of between 25 and 50 officials during the 19th century. This may seem rather small, but one should consider that between the split with Belgium in 1830 and the end of the century the entire Dutch central government — all ministries and high

councils combined — never employed more than

 about 900 public officials.¹⁵

Our approach ties in with research agendas that start out from the idea that the rise of the state consists not only of bureaucratic expansion, understood as the rather linear accumulation of tasks, but has also been a process involving ongoing communication and interaction with other administrative actors and the societal ›Umfeld‹.¹⁶ This took place not only in the outer Dutch provinces, allegedly the more backward ones, but also in Holland, the self-proclaimed heart of the nation, where the buildup of the new unitary state was far from smooth and self-evident.

The study of the dynamic relationship between state and society has given rise — in particular in the German legal and historical literature — to the notion of ›regulated self-regulation‹, which has also proved to be a fruitful perspective for the analysis of state-society relations in other European states and the United States of America.¹⁷ The idea behind this approach is to gauge the role played by state and private institutions as well as various kinds of intermediary actors in the provision of collective goods. The latter include not only material benefits, such as forms of social security, but also normative components like the rule of law, civic capital and reliable administrative procedures. State building, in this sense, is a societal challenge and a potentially conflict-ridden process, within which socio-cultural practices and reform aspirations of new state actors could clash with vested interests and ingrained mentalities and outlooks. The national state, however, has never been the exclusive holder of statehood. Our approach ›from the middle‹ tries to demonstrate how a notion of provincial statehood could to some extent emerge, and give power to

actors and practices at the provincial level: not as independent of or in opposition to national statehood, but as co-existing and interrelated with it.

This has spatial consequences too. In general, the Dutch have had a rather clear image of the province in which they live. People associate the province first and foremost with a particular geographical entity that coincides with an administrative layer between municipality and central state. However, when asked how this geographical and intermediate entity affects and permeates their daily lives, responses begin to diverge.¹⁸ This is an indication of our assumption that the institutional performance of the province is perceived differently depending on the spaces and domains that are at stake. Put differently, beyond its political and constitutional meaning, the province implies a multitude of spatial arrangements that have been shaped — and are shaped — by governmental practice, meaning in this case the implementation of provincial policies and the interactions between provincial officials and other public and private actors. Consequently, the production of these spaces is at the heart of how the province — in between central state and municipality — has fostered state formation.

For several reasons South Holland is a good case to investigate the workings of provincial government from this perspective. First of all, the province of South Holland was itself a rather new spatial entity. In 1807, when the Netherlands were ruled by Napoleon's brother king Louis, Holland, once the powerful center of the Dutch Republic, had been cut into two new administrative units. In 1810, when the Netherlands became part of the French Empire, these two entities were turned into departments. Four years later, after the defeat of Napoleon, the province of Holland was restored, but as explained above,

executive power was divided up along the lines of the recent past, which in 1840 was confirmed with the constitutional establishment of South Holland as a separate province.

Second, for many centuries the war against the water deeply affected the ways in which public administration organized itself. In an area bordering the North Sea and including the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt delta, protection against flooding was the principal aim of a range of public institutions. Moreover, South Holland was — and still is — a very important hub in a network of waterways used for national and international transportation of people and goods. Smart water management, therefore, has been an essential element of state formation from the middle, as it highlights the importance of intermediary actors in negotiating public and private interests. ›Mapping‹ space and generating knowledge about space (›Raumwissen‹), in particular in relation to water management, played a crucial role in shaping provincial government.

Third, by approaching state formation from the middle, we can foreground the interplay of the province with other players. South Holland consists of two large cities (large in the Dutch context), Rotterdam and The Hague, smaller but historically powerful cities such as Leiden and Dordrecht, and a large number of villages: over 200 in 1820. Its economic core was the port of Rotterdam, which expanded massively from the final decades of the 19th century onwards. Its periphery was made up of the rural islands in the south that were connected to the mainland by ferries. During the 19th century the provincial government's involvement in economic issues was mainly indirect through statistical investigations and information services, geared towards national and local government, but also

available to societal actors in general. The distribution of religious denominations produced another important geography that provincial government needed to take into account. For many centuries Protestantism and Catholicism have been equally strong in South Holland. Towards the end of the 19th century, when the franchise was expanded, religious convictions became the cornerstone of two new political parties, which — together with the Social Democrats — claimed a place in the political arena. The emergence of these political parties went hand in hand with the construction of ideological communities united by religion and class, also known as pillarization. Towards the end of the 19th century this political landscape contributed to the dismantling of the liberal hegemony and the redistribution of political power.

Administrative tools and social interaction forging the new state

For their theory of the state as cultural practice, Bevir and Rhodes have turned to a historical understanding of practice. They rely on what they regard as the main traits of hermeneutics and historicism — »grasping the intentional content attached to human actions« — in order to develop the idea that the state is embedded in »all kinds of contingent and shifting beliefs and actions«, which can be explained through a historical understanding.¹⁹ They do not, however, claim to be historians, nor have they themselves conducted substantial historical research. While they were able to employ ethnographic methods such as observation, participation, interviewing, and the like, historians should try to find sources that yield the

same kind of insights into living administrative traditions, patterns of rule, and routine behavior.

For centralized bureaucracies, circulars have always been the preferred instruments to reach lower levels and to forge uniformity in the execution of administrative tasks. »Securing its lines of communication«, Patrick Joyce would call this practice employed by the state to strengthen the links between center and periphery.²⁰ The Napoleonic regime was a notorious producer of circulars but, despite their publicly displayed anti-French bias, the subsequent Restoration regimes in the formerly occupied territories were a good match. Ministries flooded their provincial offices with explanations, instructions, procedures and exhortations, which had to be passed down to local authorities. The provincial government, in turn, added all sorts of circulars of its own, highlighting tasks worked out especially for the provinces in question.

The first waves of circulars reaching the municipalities following the regime change in South Holland were often exhaustive, not only in prescribing administrative actions, but also with regard to the new culture that was meant to descend on the province. The emphasis was on the liberal intentions of the king, who was full of »fatherly concern«, and abhorred the malevolent rules of the former administration. In particular the financial demands of the French were dismissed as extravagant, and the concomitant procedural regulations as idiotically laborious.

After some time, the negative references to the Napoleonic regime faded away and made way for appeals to the local authorities to comply with the instructions laid down by the national and provincial government, which were — for that matter — not so

different from the allegedly ›blind‹ and methodical directives of the French. The circulars became instruments of regular government, inconspicuous yet formative parts of a day-to-day administrative routine. In 1818, in a revealing circular from the first year of his term of office, which would last 27 years, governor A. F. J. A. van der Duyn described the way in which mayors, municipal secretaries and other local officials were supposed to conduct their official correspondence: one topic for each letter, a date, a reference to the document the letter related to, observance of the deadline for answering, and return of documents on request.²¹

This was neither the first time nor the last that a governor tried to streamline the information flow between center and periphery. From 1827 onwards, the circulars were collected in »Provinciaal Blad van Zuid-Holland«, a regularly appearing official periodical aimed at providing an overview of the most important administrative acts. In this way local offices would be less prone to mislay circulars they were supposed to consult every so often. After several years this rapidly growing collection also proved to be inconvenient, and a private publisher, supervised by the provincial authorities, put on the market a two-volume compilation of instructions and regulations of the previous decades that were still in force at the time of publication of the books.²² Such public-private partnerships ›avant la lettre‹ became characteristic of the diffusion of administrative knowledge. Provincial and local officials also entered the apparently lucrative market of collections and further explanations of administrative circulars and instructions. By the 1840s, a small library of handbooks and periodicals was available, not only in South Holland, to guide local authorities in dealing

with the unremitting flow of laws, royal decrees and circulars that came over them.

It is important to note, however, that neither under the Restoration regime nor thereafter should the circular be seen as the epitome of dirigisme and top-down government. First, governors sometimes used circulars to support private initiatives, in particular in the fields of education and poor relief. In 1827, for example, Van der Duyn urged the local population to have compassion for former prisoners who had served their time and were trying to re-integrate into society — an initiative of the association for the moral betterment of prisoners led by W. H.

Suringar.²³ Second, quite a few resolutions and concomitant circulars were in fact responses to demands from below. In 1825 the governor installed a commission for rabbit control in the province after being briefed by the population of Goedereede, on one of the islands in the south of the province, which was under constant threat of erosion of its seawalls.²⁴ Circulars and resolutions, therefore, were acts that should not only be seen in the context of an administrative system imposing rules upon lower levels of government or the population at large, but also — at least in the constitutional setting in question — as the product of a degree of interaction between state and society.

The yearly confidential reports of the governors to the minister of the Interior about the public spirit in the province point to a similar dualism in the purpose and effects of administrative tools. On the one hand, the reports reflected the extent to which the governor held the public order, economy, health, and political and administrative situation of the province to be in accordance with the expectations of the ruling government. The reports were not infrequently matter-of-course assessments of the

state of the province, full of reassuring remarks, even in times of crisis. Over the years it became more and more tempting for governors to simply copy what they had written the year before, thereby turning the reports into a habitual exercise, summing up the numbers of incoming and outgoing letters, rather than a true account of the public spirit.²⁵ On the other hand, the reports were also a means for the governor to convey the wishes of the institutions and the population to the government. In the reports written by Van der Duyn the needs in the fields of education, poor relief, and the economy were extensively discussed in the hope that the government would take action.

Another way of getting to know the needs of the province and interacting with the population was the yearly tour of the province. The instructions for the governors, laid down by a royal decree in 1820, prescribed that over a period of four years they visit all municipalities in their provinces.²⁶ Although this was a formidable task in the province of South Holland with over 200 municipalities, governors took it quite seriously. They talked to the mayors, aldermen, local councilors, municipal secretaries, and municipal treasurers. They inspected the local archives, the population registers and tax rolls, and gave advice where needed. Whereas for the larger cities, which could boast a long-established experience of self-government, the visit was a duty call, for the numerous municipalities in the countryside the arrival of the governor was a major event for which the whole village turned out. Apart from the municipal offices the governors often also visited the local school, welfare institutions and factories, if there were any, and thus made the weight of the state felt also outside the administrative centers. They reported on their tour to the minister,

but frequently also published summaries in the ›Provinciaal Blad‹. The regular inspections helped to spread the administrative system of the unitary state into the smallest corners of the province, while allowing the local authorities a degree of involvement in its implementation.

Mediating conflict

While the years after 1814, and again after 1848, had been characterized by efforts to diffuse the administrative implications of the constitution, by the last decades of the 19th century the unitary state-building process was coming to an end, and nation-building entered a new phase. Local government had come of age, and the extension of the franchise allowed new social groups to enter the municipal councils. The emergence of orthodox Protestants, Catholics, and socialists at the local level was a thorn in the flesh of the liberal elite, which until 1900 retained its comfortable majority in the provincial council, and hence also in the provincial executive, supported by the appointed king's commissioner. From a safe distance, however, the ruling elite witnessed increasing tensions, which were becoming particularly apparent in the smaller municipalities where Protestants and Catholics balanced each other out. The almost proverbial politics of accommodation that had characterized elite behavior for centuries was challenged by priests, pastors, schoolteachers, trade unionists, and other local leaders. Irritations stemming from church bell chiming, processions or public commemorations could easily lead to street rows or other disturbances.²⁷

The geography of religion determined the degree of administrative intervention. Where the definition of provincial statehood in the first half of the 19th

century had mainly been determined from above, by provincial administrators positioning themselves between national and local government, after 1848 religious discord playing out differently at the local level became a new challenge.

The official, albeit not public, and the private papers produced by commissioner Cornelis Fock, the chief administrator of South Holland between 1871 and 1900, abound in depreciatory remarks about the influences of ›Rome and Dordt‹ — Rome standing for Catholicism and Dordt for orthodox Protestantism, after the city of Dordrecht, where in 1619 the confessional standards of Calvinism had been established.²⁸ It was difficult for him to accept that religious beliefs were gaining the upper hand in political affairs, and that clergymen should become the ultimate guides when it came to the interests of local government. Fock clearly belonged to the group of conservative liberals who believed they were best placed to define the boundaries of the general interest, and that their opponents were merely representing factional interests.

It is all the more remarkable that conflicts could largely be contained, both within the representative bodies and between opposing social groups ›on the street‹. The behavior of the provincial authorities and mayors was crucial in keeping the ›troublemakers‹ at bay. Despite his personal convictions, Fock was generally able to swallow his pride and prejudice when confronted with the threat of religious strife and disturbance of public order. His main aim was to keep church and state separate. This started when controlling the yearly municipal budgets, one of the principal tasks of the provincial executive. Some municipalities tried to allocate expenditure to public charitable institutions in order to support, indirectly, the churches, which in this

way could spend less on the poor relief they were organizing. Fock used to insist on blocking these subsidies, as the poor law of 1854 had laid down that only in cases of ›absolute inevitability‹ could the poor and needy turn to the civic authorities for charity. Similarly, the province continued to urge the municipalities to promote state-subsidized education, instead of allowing the churches to expand the number of denominational schools.

Fock's dedication to the idea of separation of church and state came most clearly to the fore in his relationship with mayors. Under Dutch law the mayor was and is a state-appointed official. His job depended to a large extent on the support of the commissioner. Fock made it oftentimes clear to his mayors that he would not tolerate interference of the churches in municipal affairs, and that religious riots should be prevented at all costs. In 1872, when the seizure of Den Briel by the Sea-Beggars in 1572 (a major event in the history of the Dutch Revolt) was commemorated, the situation in a number of villages, especially in the southwest of the province, threatened to get out of hand. Whereas Protestants were happy to indulge in boisterous festivities, for the Catholics the commemoration was a touchy subject. Mayors tried to convince the villagers to display the national flag. Where this did not happen willingly, Protestant mobs were prone to use force. In most villages the mayors somehow succeeded in avoiding violent encounters. In Naaldwijk, for example, the mayor and some well-to-do citizens patrolled the streets and squares, appealed to the king — the traditional guarantor of civic peace —, and led people to the local pubs, which were kept open late for the occasion. In another village, Loosduinen, the mayor was less successful. He had to call in military support from The Hague to restore

order. Fock was particularly put out by this mayor, and had him removed.²⁹

In the Netherlands religious and social peace was hard-won, but has never become a *fait accompli*. In the second half of the 19th century, when religious denominations were demanding a greater share of public life and the process of pillarization began to take shape, the danger of civil unrest loomed large. Commissioners played a crucial role in inculcating mayors with the idea of keeping up neutrality. Admittedly, the use of force was not ruled out, but mostly goal-oriented communication and frequent interaction were sufficient to smooth people's ruffled feathers. This way of acting was largely in line with the notion of general interest that the ruling liberal elite nourished, but it was done in a consistent manner on many different occasions, which reproduced and strengthened the administrative culture of tolerance and accommodation. By the time — in the early 20th century — that Protestants, Catholics and also socialists had occupied prominent positions (as mayors and commissioners), they were sufficiently socialized in this administrative style that they too were wielding power by relying on a conciliatory approach. When dealing with religious differences, the provincial government often found itself alongside local authorities and the national government trying to maintain the neutrality of public spaces against claims by religiously inspired activists. In provinces with pockets of deep religious cleavages at the local level, such as South Holland, this form of conflict management, encouraging tolerance and steering clear of excessive violence, marked the beginning of a century of effective pillarization. The modernizing society of the Netherlands became vertically divided into ›pillars‹ according to religious and political ideologies, which

each claimed its own space, while accepting the overall framework of the nation-state.

Preconfiguring a provincial economy: numbers and space

Amidst a fundamental transformation from a predominantly farming, trade, fishery and shipping economy to a modernized mixed economy of industry and diverse agriculture, the province of Holland attempted to get to grips with structural economic changes at the micro-level. At first, in the period 1814—1840, the general attitude of the province towards economic development was rather conservative, meaning that existing enterprises suffering from hardship could ultimately count on a temporary provincial rescue. When Holland's herring fisheries experienced falling revenues for many years in a row, the provincial authorities decided to offer a subsidy to those herring-fishing companies willing to merge.³⁰ With regard to fishing and trade, the request for ad-hoc support came from the industry itself, which in times of crisis tried to convince the province that extraordinary measures were needed. Farming, being institutionally organized in self-regulatory, private, regional bodies, could count on a more systematic provincial contribution. Exhibitions, education programs, propaganda, technological experiments and breeding programs, organized through the regional bodies, received provincial funding well into the 20th century.³¹

By 1830, governor Van der Duyn van Maasdam predicted that the nature of Holland's economy, and he referred to the southern part in particular, would dramatically change over the next few decades. As

such, Van der Duyn questioned whether the existing mode of provincial involvement in economic matters, by subsidizing existing enterprises in the vested domains of pre-industrial economic activity, was still tenable. The governor's concern with the economic development of Holland reflects a gradual change in the administrative aloofness with regard to private endeavors. When the provinces of South Holland and North Holland split in 1840, an enormous increase of numbers and tables related to economic activities can be witnessed in the official records. Whereas Van der Duyn had to rely mostly on his informants and his personal observations in 1830, his successors were able to present myriad economic data generated by municipalities, which from the late 19th century onwards installed local statistical offices, by Chambers of Commerce and by agricultural organizations. Both in the annual reports for the king (after 1848 directed to the Minister) and in the reports for the Provincial States, bounteous data about employment, revenues, profit, losses, expansions and bankruptcies filled the pages.

In the course of the 19th century, the accumulation of statistics came to be one of the most significant ›little tools of knowledge‹: data was not only necessary to legitimize provincial action in the realm of economic activity, it also was a source for longitudinal analysis and prediction, a provincial undertaking that would take up a considerable portion of bureaucratic work.³² The conclusion of the annual provincial report to the king for 1841 is an early illustration of this. Based on the declining revenues in the shipping industry, the report concluded that the era of large seagoing ships and commerce, based on the overseas colonies, was definitively over in its current form. Instead shifting numbers hinted at the emergence of profitable inland, canal shipping, which would offer

new opportunities to the shipbuilding industry in the
 Rotterdam area.³³

The emergence of this laboriously created statistical knowledge was paralleled by an increasing awareness of the functional differentiation of the province's economy, which coincided with particular spaces of economic activity. Specific areas or cities became associated with particular trades or industries. A comparative and combined view of these diverse economic spaces fostered a notion of the province as an economic space in its own right. So through the collection of numbers and figures and their statistical arrangement in economic sectors, the province was articulated as a distinct spatial entity.

After the turn of the century, the province took up a new mode of intervention. Alongside subsidies and the statistical surveillance of the provincial economy, the provincial authorities, partly urged by national government, embarked on the establishment of public utilities throughout the province, mostly with the intention of modernizing the provincial economy. Since the mid-19th century, first private entrepreneurs, then large municipalities had started operating gasworks, waterworks and, finally, electricity. However, the rural parts of the province were rarely connected to these networks, and cities were unwilling or unable to extend theirs to rural communities. Particularly during and after the First World War, the province was able to expand the networks of utilities substantially. The first step was to set up provincial committees that assessed the problem, particularly with regard to electricity and water. The second step, then, was to impose rules and regulations upon South Holland's electricity supply (in 1918) and water supply (in 1924). So again, the province did not take matters into its own hands, but

sought regulatory strategies in order to mitigate

 economic stasis, shrinkage and crisis.

This new regulatory practice impacted the spatial notions of the provincial economy. As an economic space, the province was not only kept together by economic statistics, but it also became spatially integrated by connecting infrastructures such as power grids, water works, and gas works.³⁴ One could argue that the provincial involvement in public utilities was not only underpinned by an imperative of economic modernization: it was also a means to physically connect areas that had only been part of the same provincial statistics. As such, the mediating and regulatory practices in economic governance contributed to a distinct sense of provincial statehood. Integral statistics and conceptions of spatial integration through infrastructure generated legitimacy for provincial authorities to act in the economic realm. The spatial-functional conception of the provincial economy, which emerged in the 19th century, is still at the heart of governance practice today.

Remaking the landscape

Storm surges were a constant threat to the seawall along the North Sea coast and almost all of South Holland's land territory was and still is made up of polders, below sea level. A dense network of rivers and canals connected South Holland to other parts of the Netherlands and foreign countries, and thus provided for the living of those who depended on transport and trade. For the citizens of the province, water management was simply a matter of life and death. It needed the unremitting attention of the public authorities, which maintained waterfronts,

prevented the silting up of rivers, and built new
water and land connections.

Traditionally, the management of dikes, dunes, waterways, rivers, canals and polders had been the preserve of locally or regionally operating water boards (so-called ›waterschappen‹ and ›hoogheemraadschappen‹). These semi-public authorities were, however, increasingly confronted with a lack of means and manpower to control water levels, and were unable to carry out larger projects like the reclamation of land. The latter was necessary because of repeated flooding of lakes, in particular around the city of Rotterdam. In the 18th century the States of Holland had already intensified their involvement in water management. After 1814 a myriad of actors at state, provincial and local or regional level bore the responsibility for water management. At first, the involvement of the provincial government remained rather limited in comparison to other actors. Although the new constitutional framework had allocated a large portion of water management tasks to the provincial authorities, and had subjected the water boards to their control, a lack of funds and the absence of a proper staff of engineers tied down the provincial government. ›Rijkswaterstaat‹, the national bureau of water management that had been established in 1798, developed into a key player. Its engineers were dispatched across the country. In South Holland, the national government initiated important public works, such as the improvement of the waterways between Amsterdam and Gouda (1824/1825), the construction of a canal to improve access to the Rotterdam harbor (1830), and the reclamation of large areas of land (Zuidplas, 1820s; Nootdorpse Plassen, 1830s).³⁵ Such interventions not only affected South Holland's space visibly, and gave a

boost to economic development, but also made the presence of the state felt in every corner of the province.

In the second half of the 19th century, the provincial government intensified its direct involvement in water management and began to take its responsibility for the maintenance and construction of roads more seriously. In both areas, the provincial government shared its engagement with other public and private bodies. The involvement of the province could take various forms. The most preferred option was to steer from a distance, for example by giving subsidies in cases of emergency. This type of administrative action fits into the system of regulated self-regulation, which we have seen at work in the field of economy as well. Second, members of the Provincial States could take a more active role as advocates of or brokers between parties at the local, regional and national level, bringing local interest to the attention of the national government as well as the other way around. Third, at first on an ad hoc basis, in case private or public authorities failed to deliver, the provincial government started to carry out infrastructural projects on its own. Since this required both personnel and know-how, the Provincial States eventually decided to establish their own Bureau for Roads and Waterways in 1875, the ›Provinciale Waterstaatsdienst‹.

Although the revised Constitution of 1848 made an attempt to demarcate the responsibilities of public bodies with regard to transport and water management, in practice infrastructural works continued to be divided up over a range of authorities. This resulted in an ongoing power struggle between the provincial government and the local and regional water boards. From a legal perspective, the provincial state seemed to have the

advantage: the Provincial States were authorized to issue and change regulations, and to set up or abolish water boards. In 1851, the Provincial States urged the provincial executive to force local water authorities to enhance the condition of their water defenses.³⁶ As soon as this led to attempts to centralize water management by replacing smaller boards with ones covering a large area, the province met with fierce resistance. The governing bodies of several local water boards mobilized their personal networks in order to block centralization. In many cases, the older, entrenched institutions prevailed and the provincial executive was forced to abandon its reorganization efforts.³⁷ In the short term, the provincial government only managed to impose more uniform regulations for polder management, but continued to be faced with a multitude of larger and smaller water boards.³⁸

In the field of road management, the provincial state also clashed with stubborn local authorities. From the 1820s onwards, provincial government had been responsible for the maintenance of so-called second order roads: those that served as connections between towns and cities within the borders of the province. As had been the case with levee systems that had been put under provincial jurisdiction, the provincial government handed over maintenance to municipalities and local water boards. In special cases the province was willing to grant subsidies in order to guarantee the most essential communications. With the provincial government lacking personnel and expertise, and the local authorities short of money, this seemed to be a reasonable deal. The ›little tools‹ used by the provincial government to substantiate its power of oversight, and to check if subsidies were put to proper use, included regular inspection tours and

keeping the registration of roads up to date,

 especially with regard to the question as to which
 authority was responsible for maintenance. In 1852,
 the provincial government issued the »Reglement op
 de wegen en voetpaden« (Roads and Footpaths
 Regulations), which enabled provincial inspectors to
 consolidate their surveillance of road maintenance
 and to force local authorities to carry out necessary
 improvements under the threat of withdrawal of
 subsidies.³⁹

This approach characterized by a light form of
 regulated self-regulation remained the norm
 throughout the 19th century. The provincial
 government financed and carried out very few
 infrastructural projects on its own. The few spatial
 operations in which it did engage primarily
 contributed to provincial state building in the
 periphery of South Holland; not in the urban
 heartland formed by Rotterdam and The Hague, but
 in isolated rural areas to the south of Rotterdam.⁴⁰ In
 the 1850s, the province invested fifty thousand
 guilders into the construction of a road network in
 the Krimpenerwaard, a polder to the south of
 Rotterdam, which lacked a decent infrastructure. In
 the 1860s and 1870s the money spent on road
 construction gradually increased.⁴¹ The initiatives
 towards a road system in the Krimpenerwaard were
 one example, others — though much later —
 included advance payments for the Rotterdam
 Tramway Society (›Rotterdamsche
 Tramwegmaatschappij‹) in 1907 and the Holland
 Electric Railway Society (›Hollandsche Electrische
 Spoorweg-Maatschappij‹) in 1909 to construct a
 network of tramways in the polders surrounding the
 cities, and the construction of a bridge connecting
 Barendrecht, a city to the southeast of Rotterdam, to

the Hoekse Waard, one of the major islands in the south of the province.⁴²

The bridge project involved a range of public and private actors operating at several levels. In 1880 a committee of concerned citizens had initiated plans to build a bridge in order to end their island's isolation. The provincial government, which had developed a similar agenda with the construction of roads on the islands of South Holland, supported the plans and brought them before Parliament, but a majority of representatives was reluctant to take on even part of the costs. In the end, the provincial government decided to cover all the costs of the construction of the first 'provincial' bridge.⁴³ A plan that had started as a private initiative now resulted in the opening up of a new area of provincial government. In the following years, the provincial government took over from local authorities a number of other bridges that were in need of renovation and enlargement because of increasing traffic.⁴⁴ The provincial government also acted as a broker between the local and the national level, for instance when it urged the national government to include South Holland's cities in plans for new national railway connections, or when it lobbied for the construction of local rail or tramway lines for which concessions by the national government were needed.⁴⁵ It also worked the other way around, when the provincial government pushed local authorities to cooperate with the construction of new supra-local infrastructure on their territory.⁴⁶

In bringing about this more self-conscious approach of the provincial state to spatial issues, the establishment of the Bureau for Roads and Waterways played a crucial role. Albeit on a modest scale, the provincial government now possessed the

manpower and expertise in the field of infrastructure to take matters into its own hands. The new institution, however, still had to carve out its position in a crowded field. Several actors tried to make their mark on the improvement of South Holland's ›wet‹ and ›dry‹ infrastructure. The national government was bringing plans before Parliament to start digging several new canals. A group of Amsterdam and Rotterdam businessmen were pushing for this as well in an effort to improve the connections between their cities.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the provincial government also had the ambition to improve the condition of its early-modern roads and waterways, which were clearly unfit for new ways of transportation by motorized vehicles and steamship or towage respectively. The establishment of the Bureau had handed the provincial state an instrument for realizing this ambition, but it lacked jurisdiction to do so effectively. Towards the end of the century, however, municipal authorities and local water boards increasingly were willing to hand over control of key roads and waterways. They acknowledged that they lacked the financial means and engineering know-how to carry out necessary improvements. In response to this development, the provincial state changed its infrastructure policy. Handing out subsidies gave way to bringing infrastructure under provincial control.⁴⁸ Provincial statehood got another boost: passers-by could watch provincial road workers at work and were greeted by provincial bridgemen.

In care of the province

Throughout the 19th century the role of the state in public health and welfare remained fairly limited, at least by 20th-century standards. Within the parameters of what the state was prepared to do in

these sectors, it was clear that the provincial government was not expected to acquire any substantial financial autonomy, but it could leave its mark by supervision, mediation, and information, in other words by regulated self-regulation.⁴⁹

Churches, private organizations, local government bodies, and physicians continued to bear the responsibility for the alleviation of human misery stemming from economic crises and epidemics. While the debate on the right balance between public and private responsibilities lingered on, the prevention, surveillance and combating of infectious diseases prompted a higher degree of cooperation between the organizations and people involved. This proved to be an incentive for the provincial government to manoeuvre itself into a more central position. The greater role of the province was not self-evident, as local actors were sometimes reluctant to cooperate. The province stepped up the production of statistical information about the outbreak and spread of diseases, and set itself up as an information hub for everybody involved. Every year, the provincial executive drew up medical reports, which gave insight into the places of origin, the spread and the victims of infectious diseases. It continued to be the main provider of medical statistics until the 1860s, when central government took over this task.⁵⁰

It was not only through statistics that the provincial government attempted to tighten its grip on public health. Whereas in the larger cities such as Rotterdam and The Hague local government and private organizations were quite active in organizing vaccination campaigns, in the rural villages the provincial government had to be the main instigator. The opposition, however, was often fierce. Year after year, the provincial executive tried to convince local

authorities to boost vaccination against cowpox, but met with strong resistance to state interference, in particular among orthodox Protestant groups, sometimes supported by local physicians. From the perspective of provincial government, therefore, different administrative spaces emerged: urban centres where its role in public health was minimal, and rural areas where its presence was much more felt. After the new communal law of 1851, which granted more power to municipalities in connection with vaccination, the province lost some of its competences. Without a legal framework through which the province could impose vaccination, it had no instruments to force its will on local government.⁵¹

Potentially, the most direct way for the provincial government to gain influence in public health came with a law of 1818, which granted provincial and — in the larger cities — local commissions the responsibility of monitoring the quality of medical care and compliance with existing legislation (›geneeskundig onderzoek en toevorzicht‹). The provincial executive had an advisory role in the appointment of members of these commissions, and its approval was needed for the appointment of local doctors and midwives, municipal acts in medical matters, and the planning of graveyards. In terms of administrative governance, the provincial government gained some ground, but in many concrete cases of malpractice and during public health crises it had — again — no instruments to assume a more assertive role. Following the subsidiarity principle stemming from the revised constitution, new health laws promulgated in the 1860s shifted responsibilities to local government, and largely bypassed the provincial government.⁵²

In one domain of public health the province eventually acquired a direct say and financial responsibility. In the first decades of the unitary state provincial government was still only made responsible for the supervision of local institutions for the mentally disabled — ›lunatics‹ in the then-common parlance. The so-called first ›Lunacy Law‹ of 1841, however, made provincial governments directly responsible for the care of ›lunatics‹, if municipal facilities proved to be inadequate. The law was meant to encourage the province to erect new institutions or to improve the existing ones. In the 1840s the provincial executive of South Holland, together with national mental health care inspectors, set up a project for a new provincial hospital. Although an elaborate plan was developed and grounds were allotted near Scheveningen, in the end the provincial council blocked the proposal under pressure from urban elites who sat on the boards of ›madhouses‹ in their cities. They were afraid of having to close their facilities if it came to a large modern institution at the provincial level. In this case the provincial government was torn between modernization and centralization on the one hand, and local interests on the other. The latter prevailed, but the funds that had already been made available were used to improve the existing institutions.⁵³

In 1884 a second ›Lunacy Act‹ came into force, which gave the province an even greater degree of responsibility in the field of mental health care by charging it with the establishment and maintenance of mental hospitals, irrespective of existing facilities. The four old institutions in Rotterdam, Dordrecht, Delft and The Hague saw the number of patients rise from 340 in 1850 to 1060 in 1890, and had great difficulty in keeping up with new medical standards. The provincial executive of South Holland chose to

steer from a distance, and put its new competence into effect by granting subsidies and loans to local authorities and private institutions, even outside the territorial borders of the province. Between 1897 and 1907 three new mental hospitals were established in the province, and important sums were allocated to the hospitalization of patients from South Holland in other provinces. The old urban asylums were closed.⁵⁴ In this way the provincial government became a prominent actor in a specific field, a task that it continued to perform until after the Second World War. Moreover, the province supported in this way the categorization of people by the state and stimulated different societal groups to organize care from their own ideological perspective.

Poor relief was another field where public and private interests tended to interblend and sometimes clash. The constitution of 1814 made poor relief explicitly the ›subject of constant concern‹ for the national government, but this did not mean it became the financial responsibility of the state. The main tasks of the provincial government were to collect information about local poor relief, to check the finances of the institutions that were active in the field, and to monitor compliance with national laws. According to the Poor Law of 1818 (›Wet op het domicilie van onderstand‹), the municipality where poor people came from was ultimately responsible for the payment of relief, but because of frequent migration this often led to conflicts with the municipality where they were staying, whether temporarily or not. Moreover, church councils — to whom the poor were supposed to apply first — were not always willing to follow official regulations. Due to the numerous financial issues that the law caused, the provincial executive developed into a body for appeals (even though it did not possess the ultimate

juridical power to enforce its decisions). In this role as mediator the members of the provincial executive became deeply involved in a wide range of local matters, which increased their visibility and enhanced the integrative function of intermediary government.⁵⁵

The new Poor Law of 1854 followed the main thrust of the 1818 law, that is, it put the main financial burden for poor relief on civic and religious institutions, and expected the state to intervene only as a last resort. Thereby it also confirmed the provincial executive in its role as mediator between local authorities, religious organizations and, indirectly, the poor and needy themselves. Although there was no real expansion of state responsibility in poor relief throughout the 19th century, the province carved out a role for itself by controlling budgets, collecting statistics and negotiating between litigants.

Conclusion

This article has argued that state formation in the Kingdom of the Netherlands is not a clear-cut object of historical inquiry that can be studied by focusing on central government only. Instead we adopt a decentered approach to state formation by focusing on the second administrative tier of the Dutch polity, the province. Relying on empirical research into the province of South Holland, we should like to conclude by pointing to three case-transcending observations.

First, the province had to be ›invented‹ as an administrative institution of the new state. This process becomes visible not only in the statutory responsibilities of the province as a territorial unit in the unitary state, but also in the ways it concretely dealt with policy domains such as control of

municipal government, transport, economic development, public health and poor relief. Every policy demanded its own approach, sometimes extending intervention, but at other times steering from a distance. The performance of provincial government depended to a large extent on collecting information about the social realities in rural and urban communities, which resulted in the establishment and institutionalization of new administrative practices. As always, knowledge was power. Through circulars, statistics and periodical reports — in other words, ›little tools of knowledge‹ — a sense of provincial statehood emerged, which not only tightened the bond between center and periphery, but also between citizens and state. The increasing visibility of provincial representatives and officials beyond the office walls, through tours, surveys, mediation and conversations with local elites, sustained this integrative logic.

Second, the province had to be imagined as a spatial entity in its own right — not just as a collection of rural and urban municipalities or as a unit within the national territory. Administrative practice, spread over a number of policy domains, produced spatial realities and imaginations of South Holland, which transcended its mere legal-territorial meaning. Its institutional performance, ranging from direct intervention to forms of regulated self-regulation, depending on the policy in question, generated a logic of spatial integration too. Shared concerns in water management, public health and economic activity connected communities and provincial authorities. Alongside such functional arrangements of space, or ›spatialized‹ administrative categories, ›real‹ spatial integration was fostered via infrastructural projects: road works, water management and the coordination of public utilities

(such as gas and waterworks). There are, however, also examples of spatial disintegration or, to put it more mildly, examples of the continued existence of spaces that did not coincide with the provincial borders. During the 19th century the numerous water boards continued to have their parallel administrations, sometimes complying with the provincial authorities, but sometimes also competing with them. On another note, religious cleavages drew dividing lines within the province and within local communities. In small country villages afflicted by denominational strife, the presence of the provincial government, the police and sometimes even the army was more deeply felt than in the cities. The multiple spatial implications of administrative practices, therefore, were key to the articulation of different forms of provincial statehood.

Finally, our approach ›from within‹ shows that Dutch statehood was not the self-evident outcome of a process that had been set in motion in the struggle against the King of Spain in the 16th century. By starting ›from the middle‹, a range of actors, relations and practices come to the fore that often remain hidden in grand narratives of state formation. The next step could be to adopt a comparative perspective, allowing researchers to flesh out how the nation-state has been given shape in multiple practices and spaces, with differences and similarities that varied province by province. Such a history provincializes the state as Chakrabarty has provincialized Europe: maintaining a master narrative on the one hand, and writing alternative histories on the other.

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Refbacs

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